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ABSTRACT

A study explored the holistic nature of reading failure from the perspective of those who have endured the emotional and intellectual burden of not being able to read. Reading failure is frequently viewed from a fragmented, reductionist perspective. Getting to know and understand the individual's perception of literacy failure is ignored in the literature. This study draws on the stories of seven adults and their experiences of being illiterate; illiteracy is examined within the context of their lives. A remedial program was negotiated with the participants--they chose what they read and what they wrote about. These choices served as the basis for discussion, demonstration, and the application of remedial strategies. Participants were required to read every night for 10 minutes and to write for 10 minutes. To become writers, they had to write despite their vulnerability, since it was the only way to overcome the fear and trepidation often associated with being exposed on a piece of paper. Three to four hours were set aside to discuss the participants' reading histories, memories of schooling, family support and reading habits, how they coped with failure, and knowledge of the reading/writing processes. At weekly meetings they were observed reading and writing. Additionally, participants nominated for interview someone who understood their literacy failure. After ceasing the remedial program, follow-up interviews were conducted. Findings suggest fear of failure and lack of literacy success go hand in hand. Whenever participants confronted texts, they were reminded of the humiliation attached to previous unsuccessful experiences, and they relived the experience in every subsequent literacy attempt. Confronting the problem was crucial. When participants identified real purpose for reading, it had to be important enough to outweigh any reason for remaining tethered to past literacy experiences. (NKA)

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Reading-A Perspective on Life

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Paper presented at the European Reading Conference
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Reading - a perspective on life

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Introduction

This study sets out to explore the holistic nature of reading failure from the perspective of those who have endured the emotional and intellectual burden of not being able to read. Having worked in drug rehabilitation centers, goals, remand centers and with personal referrals for more than fifteen years, I have been privy to the very intimate and revealing accounts of what it means to be illiterate. If we are serious about education for all learners, we must listen to and understand the plight of those who have experienced years of being bonded to the belief that attaining literacy success was beyond their intellectual capacity.

Reading failure is most frequently viewed from a fragmented, reductionist perspective. Cause is defined according to categories broadly labeled - education, emotional, physical and socio cultural factors. The solution is based on the "fix-it" principle - better teachers, improved curriculum, administering medication, higher living standards, to name but a few. Quick solutions abound and range from the bizarre to the absurd, from upside-down reading to colored glasses. Controversy and uncertainty dominate the field. Irrespective of the methods of remediation, the results are inconclusive and all report limited success. Getting to know and understand the individual's perception of literacy failure is a factor ignored in the literature.

This study draws on the stories of seven adults and their experiences of being illiterate. Illiteracy is examined within the context of their lives. The participants remained in the study up to the point that they no longer needed reading assistance. The time frame ranged from a few weeks to several months.

The remedial program

The remedial program was negotiated with the participants - they chose what they read and what they wrote about. These choices served as the basis for discussion, demonstration and the application of remedial strategies. Adopting traditional school-type literacy practices was avoided and homework requirements were kept to a minimum. Participants were required to read every night for ten minutes and to write for ten minutes. For those hesitant to write, writing out the labels from food cupboards, copying from newspapers and magazines was suggested. It was essential that these adults put pen to paper. In order to become writers, they had to write despite their vulnerability. It was the only way to overcome the fear and trepidation often associated with being exposed on a piece of paper. Lack of writing skills, illegible handwriting and poor spelling were indelible reminders of their failure.

Participants self-selected texts to read. In previous years I sought out reading material based on their interests. However, I came to realize that success lies in putting choice and responsibility in learners' hands rather than taking ownership of the problem. An indicator of the participants' commitment to overcoming reading failure was their willingness to visit the library, to look at books and to buy magazines.

The initial meeting

Three to four hours were set aside to discuss the participants' reading histories, memories of schooling, family support and reading habits, interests, how they coped with failure and their knowledge of the reading/writing processes. This was done on a one-to-one basis. Participants did not read or write during this time. They came into the program as self-referrals and I trusted that they knew whether or not they could read and could justify this according to how they lived their lives. Understanding why they held such beliefs was crucial. Establishing trust was a fundamental step in the process. Participants

had to know that they could freely share their pain, suffering, loss and grief without fear of being judged. Building a relationship around honest, open dialogue and genuine concern was a prime objective.

Piecing together a literacy history

Participants attended weekly meetings of approximately one-hour duration. During these meetings, they were observed reading and writing. Discussions revolved around the writing they had completed during the week. They were assisted to read from their self-selected texts and demonstrations of how the reading process works were given at the point of need.

In addition, participants were asked to nominate for interview someone who understood their literacy failure. These informants were interviewed and included family members, friends and employers. These informants offered another dimension to understanding the participants' literacy failure and the impact that it had on their lives. Participants were free to leave the program at any time and they had to decide when they had achieved their literacy goals.

Understanding literacy failure

This study draws on the literacy experiences of four males and three females over a period of a year. After ceasing the remedial program, contact was maintained and follow up interviews were conducted. All had attended school up to and including Year Ten - long enough to master basic literacy skills. The participants defined themselves as failures in relation to reading and writing and they saw themselves as "different". They associated feelings of embarrassment and humiliation with reading and writing. They described themselves in terms of being slow, dumb and having a complex about their inability to master something that others do with relative ease.

There was a remarkable similarity in the participants' memories of their early school days. All recall specific incidents in Year 1 or 2 that they associated with their literacy failure. These memories were often so vivid that the color of the teacher's dress, the print on the page arranged in narrow columns and where and with whom they were sitting are recalled in great detail. Some participants remembered the exact word they failed to spell or read. All remember the anxiety and humiliation they felt at the time. Most cried as they reflected on experiences of being embarrassed in front of peers. They described how teachers stopped reading and left them to complete sentences. They remembered the physically aggressive acts of teachers directed at them, for example, being hit and thumping the desk because they could not read. They recalled the insults and taunts aimed at them and members of their families such as: "You are just as dumb and stupid as your sister was". The depth of the hurt and pain had endured over many years and had shaped their view of reading and writing. In fact, they were pre occupied with experiences that reinforced their failure. The same feelings of humiliation surfaced whenever they attempted to engage with print.

The participants' prime method of word attack was sounding words out causing them to fixated on unknown words. Misconceptions about the reading process prevented them from anticipating or predicting on the basis of meaning and they frequently gave up in frustration. Most were puzzled at how the rest of the world knew that t-h-e said "the" and they did not. They believed there was something wrong with them. They did not know and understand how good readers used a range of clues including contextual clues, comprehension strategies and syntax.

They refused to write words that they could not spell. Warren explained that he was forced to write shift reports for the next foreman using three and four letter words because he was so embarrassed that he might spell something incorrectly. Beryl

remembered getting hit with a ruler because she could not spell potato and to this day has a phobia about spelling. She said that outside of the spelling quiz, she was confident that she knew how to spell the word.

All participants had attended remedial classes at some point in their education. They agreed that the school system contributed to their illiteracy. Generally, they claimed to be disinterested and let down by a system that did not know what to do with, or for them. Often they were relocated to lower classes, constantly sent on messages, or ignored.

The level of support from parents varied. Some parents sought tutors. Other participants felt that they could not confide in their parents and so spent considerable time camouflaging their failure at home.

During the initial meeting, if participants identified a significant other that they felt had somehow contributed to their illiteracy, they were asked whether or not they were willing to discuss the issue with the significant other. Some participants elected to have these conversations and the outcomes were significant and positive. Sam felt that he could never live up to his father's expectations. Following a visit to his father, he explained: "I went to visit dad. He is living in a caravan and we drank untold cups of coffee. I finally got up the courage to say 'Dad what is it you want me to be?" Dad replied, "Sam the only thing I have ever wanted you to be is happy." Sam said that he felt free. How he saw himself in terms of literacy was very much embodied in the emotional relationship he had with his father.

All participants avoided literacy tasks for fear of being humiliated. Most developed very complex and sophisticated coping strategies ranging from wearing slings "in case they were asked to complete forms", to ordering the same take away meal as the person in front of them. Others had business cards made instead of leaving notes or "tuned out" completely.

Commitment to achieving literacy success was paramount. It was essential that the participants identified real reasons for breaking the patterns that keep them from engaging with literacy acts. The motivation to achieve had to come from their desire. They set the goals and I embraced every goal irrespective of how grand or miniscule it was - choosing to read bedtime stories to their children, go to university and apply for promotion were just a few.

Punctuality, completion of homework tasks, eagerness to engage with literacy tasks and critical self-reflection are just a few of the indicators of the participants' dedication to success. Diane failed to arrive for our prearranged meeting. After waiting for thirty minutes, and realizing that I was more committed to her success than she was, I phoned her. She explained that it was her birthday and that the family had planned a birthday dinner at an expensive restaurant. She decided that she needed to have her hair done. I promptly explained that while she continued to make everything in her life more important than literacy success, her pattern of failure would continue. By seeking remedial therapies and then sabotaging her attempts, she did not have to assume responsibility and could lay the blame on the failed approach. Through out her life, Diane had tried many solutions that served to distract her from the real issue - reading. At our next meeting time, Diane arrived looking rushed and flustered. She said that there was no one available to drive her so she had to organize a taxi to ensure she would arrive on time. Finally, Diane took ownership of her problem and within a few weeks, she was a successful reader.

Conclusion

Fear of failure and lack of literacy success go hand in hand. Whenever the participants confronted texts, they were reminded of the humiliation, embarrassment, sadness that was attached to previous unsuccessful experiences. They relived the experience in every subsequent literacy attempt. When faced with the choice of participating and failing or not

participating at all, the subjects chose the latter. The solution was in their willingness to give up coping strategies in preference to taking the first risky, uncertain steps towards reading and writing. Success depended on them rethinking the beliefs they held about themselves and what it meant to be a reader and writer.

Just wanting to read and write was not enough. Acting on the decision and assuming responsibility was the only way forward. Confronting barriers and owing the problem was crucial.

They had rationalized their failure to those whom they trusted and avoided those they didn't. Establishing a trusting relationship where grief, anger and frustration could be expressed freely was an important part of the remedial process.

The participants identified real purpose for reading. These real purposes had to be important enough to outweigh any reason for remaining tethered to literacy experiences of the past. Two months after ceasing remediation, Tom confided that he had come to the realization that "It wasn't the books that were stopping me. It was the bloke that was trying to read them." When the illiterate adult reaches Tom's level of awareness, success is imminent.